SAṀSKĀRAS

The Hindu Sacraments

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Srimatham publications 2013

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Introduction

The word **Saṁskāra** is one of those words for which there is no single exact corresponding word in the English language. It is usually translated as "more, religious rite, ceremony, social observances, formalities and punctilious behaviour." But none of these words convey the actual meaning of the Sanskrit term *Saṁskāra.* The closest approximation is the word *sacrament* which means:— "religious ceremony or act regarded as an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace".

In the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches it includes the seven rites of baptism, confirmation, communion, penance, extreme unction, orders and matrimony.

The word *Saṁskāra* is derived from the Sanskrit root meaning "to refine". In the classical Sanskrit literature the word *Saṁskāra* is used in a very wide sense:— in the sense of education, cultivation, training, making perfect, refining, polishing, embellishment, impression, form, mould, operation, impression on the sub-conscious mind, a purificatory rite, a sacred rite or ceremony, consecration, sanctification and hallowing; idea, notion and conception; effect of work, merit of action etc.

Pānini defines saṁskāra as *samparyupebhyaḥ karotu bhūṣaṇe* — that which adorns one's personality.

The Śabda-koṣa defines it as *saṃskārāṇāṃ guṇāntarādhānam saṃskāraḥ* — that which brings about quality transformation.

In the Jaimini sūtras (111. 1. 3) the sage explains the term *Saṁskāra* as:— "an act which makes a certain thing or person fit for a certain purpose".

The Tantra-vartika (p. 1078) defines *Saṁskāra* as:— "those acts and rites that impart suitability or fitness [*adhikāra*]" and further adds that *adhikāra* is of two kinds:—

1. The removal of negative mental conditioning (*pāpa-kṣaya*)
2. The generation of positive qualities through purification of the mind (*citta-śuddhi*).

The word *"Saṁskāra"* as "sacrament" means the religious purificatory rites and ceremonies for sanctifying the body, mind and intellect of an individual.

The purpose of life is a gradual training in spiritual-unfoldment. All of life is a ritual and a sacrament and every phase of one's physical evolution should be sanctified for service of the Divine.

By means of the *Saṁskāras*, the mind is reawakened to the Ultimate Goal in life which is spiritual wisdom and Liberation from the cycle of births and deaths.

Through the compulsory performance of the *Saṁskāras* in ancient India the goal of the great Rishis was the nurturing a society uniform in culture and character and having the same ethical ideals and spiritual aims. They were successful to a great extent in their attempt. The Hindus are a very heterogenous group with an extremely rich and complex culture, the core elements of which were assimilated by the entire South East Asian region and in fact influenced even the great nations of China and Japan.

Social privileges and rights are also connected with the *Saṁskāras*. The *Upanayana* (initiation ceremony) is the *sine qua non* for admission into the Brahminical Community and its sacred literature — the Vedas. Without the *Upanayana* one cannot study the Vedas and thus does not attain competency to perform the sacred rites enjoined by the Vedas.

The Scriptures emphatically declare that a brahmin is only such by virtue of learning and wisdom. An ignorant brahmin is a contradiction in terms. Today it is commonly seen that those who are born into brahmin families wear the sacred thread and claim the revered status but do not know if the Vedas and Upanishads are potable or edible!

The Āgamas opened the way for the reception of the sacraments by all members of the Hindu community with the use of Tantric mantras in place of the Vedic texts. The Sacraments have generally being administered to all communities with non-Vedic mantras. Over the centuries many local observances and customs were adopted — hence the remarkable variation noticed today in marriage ceremonies for example.

Nowadays the sacraments apart form marriage and final rites have been largely neglected by non-brahmin communities throughout the world and even amongst the Brahmins it is only a few die-hards that still receive them as prescribed by Scripture.

Synonyms for the word **saṃskārah**

Śīksa — education

Camaka — brightness

Sajāvata — adornment

Ābhūṣana — ornament

Ākāra — shape

Sāñca — mould

Kriyā — activity

Vicāra — thought

Puṇyā — virtue

Dhāraṇā — stability or concentration

Prabhāva-smṛti — lasting impression on the mind

Pāvaka karma — the nature and quality of fire

With revivalist movements like the Arya Samaj, and proselytising movements like ISKCON and the Universal Saiva Church in Hawaii, the Saṁskāras are once again being rejuvenated and enlivened by being administered to all members of the community who request them.

1. The Aim of the Saṁskāras.

Sacraments are "an outward visible sign of an inward spiritual grace."

For Hindus the *Saṁskāras* are a living, vibrant religious experience. Through the Sacraments of the life cycles, the body which is the temple of God is sanctified and rendered fit for service to God. The *Saṁskāras* are a means of moulding the personality of the individual, and through this moulding one becomes an ideal member of society and an enlightened being.

The performance of the *Saṁskāras* is also linked to material benefits that are prayed for. In all the *Saṁskāras* prayers are offered for prosperity, wealth, cattle, fame, honour, learning etc. But it must be stressed that none of these material benefits are desired for their own sake. The purpose of having more wealth is to be able to distribute it in charity to others. The fame sought is not worldly fame but fame of spiritual accomplishment gained through learning and wisdom. Knowledge of the Veda was sought in order to be able to impart it to others.

The priests have always welcomed and blessed the material aspirations of common people. Wealth is the basis of dharma, and dharma is the basis for a peaceful, contented and spiritually orientated society.

In describing the aims of the saṃskāras, the sage Aṅgirasa gives the analogy of a painting and says, "Just as a picture is painted with various colours, so the character of an individual is formed by undergoing various *Saṁskāras* properly".

Vīramitrodaya in his saṃskāra Prakāśa claims:—

Ātma-śarīrānyatar-niṣṭho vihit-kriyājanyo atiśaya viśeṣaḥ saṃskāraḥ

The samskāra is a unique religious act that gives rise to virtuous qualities.

The Eight Ātma Guṇas

The sage Gautama gives eight spiritual-virtues of the Self (*ātma-guṇas*), that need to be cultivated for spiritual unfoldment and this is achieved through the medium of the *Saṁskāras*.

The eight gunas or qualities of the Self are are:— *dayā, kṣānti, anasūya, śauca, anayāsa, maṅgala, akārpaṇya, aspṛha.*viz., compassion, forbearance, freedom from envy, purity, calmness, right behaviour, and freedom from greed and covetousness

- **Dayā** — compassion. This implies love for all creatures, such love being the very fulfilment of life. There is indeed no greater happiness than that derived by loving others. *Dayā* is the basis of all the spiritual qualities.
- **Kṣānti** — patience. One aspect of *kṣānti* is patiently tolerating disease, poverty, misfortune and so on. The second is forgiveness and it implies loving a person who even causes us pain and trouble.
- **Anasūya** — freedom from envy. Envy or jealousy is burning pain caused by another's possession, prosperity or status. Understanding that everything obtained and achieved by us is due to personal effort as well as Karmic potential, we must be mature enough to regard another's better position as the result of good actions done in their previous birth.
- **Śauca** — purity or cleanliness. Purity is to be maintained in all matters such as environment, bathing, dress and food.[1]
- **Anayāsa** — calmness. It is the opposite of "*ayāsa*" which denotes effort, stress, exertion, etc. *Anayāsa* means to have a feeling of lightness, to take things easy. One must avoid becoming stressed and succumbing to mental strain. One must not feel any duty to be a burden and must develop the attitude that everything happens according to the will of the Lord, and all acts are to be done as service to the Supreme.
- **Maṅgala** — auspiciousness. *Maṅgala* is an air of happiness that is characterised by dignity and purity. We must remain cheerful and happy and radiate happiness and joy wherever we go and exude auspiciousness.
- **Akārpaṇya** — generosity. Miserliness is known as *kṛpana*. "*Akārpaṇya*" is the opposite of miserliness. We must give generously and whole-heartedly. At Kuruksetra Arjuna felt dejected and refused to wage war with his own kin. In doing so, according to the Gita, he was guilty of "*kārpanya doṣa*". It means, contextually, that he abased himself to a woeful state, he became "miserly" about himself. *Akārpaṇya* is the quality of a courageous and zestful person who can face problems determinedly.
- **Aspṛha** — non-grasping. "*Spṛha*" means desire, a grasping nature. "*Aspṛha*" is the opposite, being without grasping desire. Desire is at the root of all suffering but to eradicate it from the mind seems an almost impossible task. By performing rites again and again and by constantly endeavouring to acquire the spiritual qualities one will eventually become free from grasping desire.

[1] In Manu's listing of dharmas that are applicable to all, *ahimsa* or non-violence comes first, followed by *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (non-covetousness; non-stealing is the direct meaning), *śauca* (cleanliness) and *indriya-nigraha* (self-control).

2. Participants.

The direct participants in all the *Saṁskāras* are the family unit — mother, father and children, but it is customary to invite all the close relatives to witness and to be part of the rites and ceremonies. Every *Saṁskāra* is also accompanied by the customary feeding and distributing of gifts.

If the father is learned in the Veda then it is he that administers the sacraments to his children, but in most cases one uses the services of the family priest (*purohita*). It is usual to invite one priest for the regular sacrament but in marriage ceremonies it is customary to have two priests — one from bride's side and one from the groom's side.

The person who institutes the performance of a *Saṁskāra* is known as the **Yajamāna** — the patron or sacrificer.

3. The Constituent Elements of the Sacraments

There are two general elements underlying the *Saṁskāras* founded upon the dual concept of *sakala* and *niṣkala*.

The material world as we experience it through our 5 senses is known as the *sakala* realm — the objective realm of form. In this connection the *Saṁskāra* is a purely social event.

The second realm is the *niṣkala* — the subjective realm of our inner experiences which include the lower and the higher astral planes. From this perspective the *Saṁskāras* are a spiritual event of great importance in bringing about transformation through the seeding of positive affirmations.

3:1. The mystical element.

The mystical element in the *Saṁskāras* is based on the *niṣkala* concept of positive and negative cosmic forces (Devas & Asuras) which affect one for good or bad — all of reality consists of positive and negative forces and Hindu ritual is aimed at a balancing and harmonising these forces — not eliminating one in favour of the other.

It is considered that these cosmic forces become particularly strong in their potential influence at every important juncture in a person's life. During pregnancy and childbirth the mother and child become particularly susceptible to these cosmic forces. Therefore, certain rites performed during the *Saṁskāras* are designed to remove hostile and negative forces (*Asuras*) and to attract beneficial ones (*Devas*), so that there will be unobstructed prosperity and development.

Hindus believe that humankind requires protection, consecration and refinement. For this we depended on cosmic forces known as *Devas*. (lit. *Shining Ones*). These Devas are able to help us to a certain limited degree in our material well-being and spiritual evolution but they cannot give us Liberation, only the Supreme Being can do that.

(a) Attraction of Favourable Influences.

Invocations of Cosmic Forces and prayers are the front line methods of attracting favourable influences. At the time of marriage; *Prajāpati* — the Lord of Progeny, and at the time of the initiation — *Brihaspati*— the Preceptor of the Devas is invoked for protection and fulfilment of the rite. At the time of the *Garbhadhāna* (Conception) Vishnu as the Preserving Energy of the cosmos is invoked and asked to bless and protect the embryo.

Suggestion and reference to analogous phenomena play a great part in Hindu mysticism. *Touch* exercises a psychological power and thus by touching things that are beneficial in themselves one attracts positive influences.

e.g. In the *Sīmantonnayana* ceremonies a sprout of the *Udumbara* (fig) tree is touched to the head of the wife in order to convey the wish for a male offspring. Mounting a grinding stone during the marriage and initiation ceremonies brings

about stability and the overcoming of conflict. Touching the heart during the marriage rites signifies union and produces harmony between husband and wife. As breath is a symbol of life, the father breathes thrice on the new-born child to confer His blessings and protection.

The two major sacraments of initiation and marriage are usually preceded by the planting of seeds by happily married women (*sumaṅgalīs*[2]). This ceremony is accompanied with chants for the ever increasing health and prosperity of the recipients.

(b) The Elimination of Hostile Influences.

For eliminating the negative influences several means are adopted. The first of them is *propitiation* — offerings are made to the elementals and forces of chaos (*bhūtas*) in order to appease them and thus avert any negativity. Another method is simply getting rid of anything that could attract negativity. For example, at the time of tonsure (head-shaving ceremony) the hair is mixed with cow dung and buried in a cow shed or thrown into a river, so that it could not be used in black magic. Noise is made at the time of tying the *maṅgala sūtra* (Token of wedlock) to drive away negative forces. Combing the hair at the time of the *Sīmantonnayana* (Hair-parting) was also a means to remove evil influences. But when propitiation is inefficient, another step is taken — mischievous spirits are forcefully expelled, threatened and directly attacked with mantras and gestures. Certain prayers are offered for their destruction such as those used during the birth ceremonies for the protection of the mother and child.

(c) Benedictions

Benedictions pronounced by the priests and confirmed by the congregation convey the sentiment of goodwill and affection towards celebrants. It is believed that priests through their practice of truth, piety and meditation have the power to absolve one of sins and to bless. Anything that a pious priest says in sincerity is bound to come true, hence every sacrament ends with the pronunciation of the benedictions. It is also important to note that the benedictions recited are always particular as well as general. The particular benedictions relate to the welfare of the immediate family, and these are always followed by the universal benedictions for the welfare of all beings in all the realms of existence. At every major occasion in our lives we remember that we are part of the cosmic symphony, and we extend our blessings, compassion, loving kindness and good-will to all beings that share this Cosmos with us.

3:2. The Social Aspect of the Sacraments.

One of the fundamental propositions of Hindu civilisation is that every single individual is an important member of society and is dependant for his/her survival on the integrity, security and wellbeing of the group. Therefore individual rights are secondary to the rights of the group as a whole. Every *Saṁskāra* reaffirms this inter-dependence on the group by having all the family and neighbours participate in the celebrations. Food which is the basis of life is an important auxiliary to all Hindu celebrations, and a sacrament would not be a sacrament if there was not the customary feeding of the guests.

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[2] It is considered as inspiring and empowering to be blessed by a successful person. From a worldly perspective people pay huge amounts of money and make incredible efforts to be touch by or to touch a celebrity! So this is a universal human phenomena.

4. Honorarium

An essential element of all Hindu ritual practices is the offering of honorarium (*Dakṣina*) to the priests. It is the sacred duty of the priest to serve the community through assisting in the administration of the sacraments. But the community too has the duty of supporting the priests that are the custodians of the ancient Vedic tradition by ensuring that the rites never decline. Money in today's society is the medium of exchange and the householder is therefore obligated to give the priest as much as he can afford. The Shastras enjoin that a priest should not haggle over his fee and this ensured that every eligible member of the community could participate in the religious life of the community regardless of financial standing.

5. Eligibility.

According to the Dharma Śāstras the sacraments should be performed for all males of the upper three social groups;— Brāhmins, Kṣatriyas and Vaiśyas. The sacraments were administered to girls but without Vedic mantras. Members of the fourth order of society — the Śūdras, were exempt from the Vedic Sacraments and from all religious duties and obligations. This was due to the fact that they constituted the semi-skilled and largely uneducated labour force and they were thus freed from lengthy, expensive and complex rituals which they could neither understand nor afford.

The only Sacraments universal to all members of the Hindu community is the sacrament of marriage and the final rites.

On the other hand, the Sacraments are obligatory on Brahmins who are the custodians and transmitters of the Ancient Faith (*Sanātana Dharma*). A Brahmin who does not undergo all the Sacraments especially the sacrament of initiation and study of the Vedas cannot claim membership in the Brahmin community. On the subject of caste it is important to note the following quotations from Scripture.

yasya yal lakṣaṇaṃ proktaṃ puṃso varṇābhi vyanjakam |
yad anyatrāpi dṛśyeta tat tenaiva vinirdiśet ||

If the qualities pertaining to a certain caste are seen in another caste, then the later are to be classified as belonging to the qualities pertaining to a certain caste are seen in another caste, then the later are to be classified as belonging to the former. (Srimad Bhagavatam Sk. 7; Adhy. 11 ; 35.)

yathā kāñcanatām yāti kāṃsyaṃ rasa vidhānataḥ |
tathā dīkṣā vidhānena dvijatvaṃ jāyate nṛṇāṃ ||

As bell metal is turned into gold through the application of an alchemical process, so one who is initiated attains to the status of a brahmin. (Vaishnava Tantra)

śūdraṃ vā bhagavad bhaktaṃ niṣādaṃścapaṃ tathā |
dvija jāti samaṃ manyu na yāti narakaṃ naraḥ ||

I (Krishna) consider a Sudra, Niṣāda, Chaṇḍāla or a Brahmin equal to one another if they are devotees of the Lord. None of these are bound for hell. (Garuda Purana Khanda 1.230;49)

The is also a well-known and oft quoted verse in India which goes:—

janmanā jāyate śūdro samskārāt dvija ucyate |

Everyone is born a Sudra, it is only through the sacraments that one becomes "twice-born"

Nowadays the majority of Hindus only perform a few popular sacraments:— naming, head-shaving, marriage and the final rites.

6. The Sources of the Saṁskāras

6.1.The Grhya Sūtras

The Grhya Sūtras are the ancient Vedic texts which belong to the various Vedic schools. These texts were written by various great teachers and differ somewhat from each other. They do not make a clear distinction between the sacraments and domestic rituals.

Hārita divides the domestic rituals into:—

a. *Daiva Saṁskāras* — for the propitiation of the deities at various seasons in the year.

b. *Brahmā Saṁskāras* which are used to sanctify the individual.

The funeral and post death rituals (*apara-prayoga*) are always treated separately because they are regarded as being inauspicious and it should not be described along with auspicious ones. It was, perhaps, also due to the fact that the life history of an individual closes with the advent of death and the posthumous ceremonies had no direct bearing on the cultivation of personality. Only a few describe the funeral and posthumous rites; Paraskara, Aśvalāyana and Baudhāyana.

Āśvalāyana mentions only 11, Pāraskara, Baudhāyana and Vārāha gṛhya-sūtras claim 13 and the Vaikhānas have 18.

According to Manu the *Smārta Saṁskāras* or the *Śāririka* (personal) *Saṁskāras* are 13, from conception to death.

Beginning from the conception they are: —

1. *Garbhadhāna* — consummation, impregnation
2. *Pumsavana*— Sanctification of the embryo
3. *Simantonnayana*— the parting of the hair for a successful delivery
4. *Jātakarma*— birth rites
5. *Nāmadheya (nāma-karaṇa)* — naming
6. *Niṣkramana*— first outing
7. *Anna-prāśana*— weaning
8. *Cūḍā-karma*— tonsure
9. *Upanayana* — initiation
10. *Keśānta*— first shaving (sometimes omitted in the manuals)
11. *Samāvartana* — graduation (often included in the marriage sacrament)
12. *Vivāha* — marriage,
13. *Antyeṣṭhi*— final rites.

6.2. The Paddhatis and the Prayogas.

The *Paddhatis* and *Prayogas* are manuals for priests that deal with only the *Brahma Saṁskāras* and ignore the *Daiva Saṁskāras* altogether, partly because they have now become obsolete and partly because there are specific digests which deal with them.

The *Prayogas* have two divisions:—

- **Pūrva Prayoga** — deals with all the Saṁskāras from birth and before death.
- **Apara Prayoga** — which deals with the funeral and associated rites.

The usual number of the *Saṁskāras* in the *Pūrva Prayoga* is from 10 to 16 (from Garbhadhāna to Vivāha) many of the *Paddhatis* are actually called "*The Daśa-karma-paddhiti*," or "The Manual of the Ten Sacraments' which are:—

1. *Garbhadhāna* — consummation, impregnation
2. *Pumsavana*— Sanctification of the embryo
3. *Simantonnayana*— the parting of the hair for a successful delivery
4. *Jātakarma*— birth rites
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7. *Anna-prāśana*— weaning
8. *Cūḍā-karma*— tonsure
9. *Upanayana* — initiation
10. *Vivāha* — marriage

Garbhadānam puṃsavanam sīmanto jātakarma ca |
Nāmakriyā niṣkramaṇe annāhśanam vapana-kriyā ||
Karṇa-vedho vratādeśo vedārambha kriyā vidhiḥ |
Keśānto snānam udvānho vivāhagni praigrahaḥ ||

7. Essential Ritual Elements of the Saṁskāras

Water — The Purification Ceremony

Every *Saṁskāra* is preceded by the purification and sanctification ceremony known as *Punyāha Vācanam*. A pot of water symbolising the life-force is sanctified with prayers for absolution of sins and purification of negative tendencies. This water which becomes energised by the chanting of mantras is then sprinkled over all the participants and drunk in an act of holy communion.

Fire — Agni; the Mystic Fire

At almost every Saṁskāra, Agni — the Mystic Fire, is invoked to act as the messenger and intermediary between the Devas and humans. Every domestic ritual is accompanied by the invocations and offerings made into the sacred fire which has been duly consecrated. Fire is the tangible symbol of the Divine Presence and forms the gateway between the spiritual realm and the physical realm. It is symbolic of wisdom which dispels the darkness of ignorance — enlightenment is the ultimate goal of all the *Saṁskāras*.

The Prenatal Sacraments

1. Garbha-dana

The *Garbhadana* is known as a *Kṣetra Saṁskāra* and is only done in a ritual manner in the first act of consummation after marriage. According to the Grhya Sūtras the proper time for performance of this sacrament is from the fourth to the 16th night after menstruation. The later part of this period is preferred and even nights generally are believed to produce boys and odd nights girls. Procreation is the principle purpose of marriage and a compulsory duty enjoined by the Vedas in order to repay the debts to Devas, Rishis and manes.

The gist of the prayers chanted at this time is;—

> "May we produce strong and long-lived children as fire is produced by friction; may they be illustrious. May we beget radiant (with spiritual knowledge) and wealthy children. May we donate liberally to the needy and attain *moksha*. May God make you fit for conception. May the Creator and the Divine Architect give a beautiful form to the child. O Vishnu let her deliver the child at the tenth month. Let no evil harm you. Let your child be free from defects like lameness, deafness etc. May you be a granter of all wishes like the divine Kamadhenu etc."

2. Pumsavana

Usually performed in the 3rd month of pregnancy when the sex of the embryo is determined. The purpose of this sacrament is to pray for the birth of a male child. The reason for desiring that the first born be a male was conditioned by the social circumstances of the Vedic people thousands of years ago. The society was agrarian and there were no social services — men were needed for the hard work of farming and protection of the resources. Girls generally left the community to reside with their in-laws and as such were considered as an investment liability. And in a religious context it was important that there be a son for the performance of the final rites of the parents. Another reason why a son was so much more desirable than a girl was principally for the purpose of performing the funeral rites. Everyone was terrified at the thought of dying without having any one to perform their final rites. In fact the Shastras also give directions for an individual to perform his own rites prior to dying, in the absence of a son.

Having said this it should also be mentioned that there is also provision made for the appointment of a daughter to do the final rites. And the Dharma Shastras also state that if one among brothers has a son then they are all considered to have a son through him — because nephews are also considered as sons and can perform the final rites of their uncles and aunts. Hence the popular Hindu obsession with male off-spring is unfounded.

The *Pumsavana* is also considered a *Kṣetra Saṁskāra* and is only done in the case of the first pregnancy. Nowadays the *Pumsavana* rite is done in conjunction with the *Simantonnayana* ceremony. The *Pumsavana* is performed on a day ruled by a male Nakṣatra (asterism).

The usual preliminaries are performed with the fire sacrifice. Thereafter two young girls are given the task of grind the shoot of a banyan tree adding a few drops of milk. This concoction is given to the pregnant lady to sniff into her right nostril together with the recitation of a prayer for the birth of a son or a worthy child. According to Susruta, the great Ayurvedic doctor, the juice of the banyan stem has certain properties which prevent complications during pregnancy

The mother fasts and keeps silent after the ceremony until a star is seen. The ceremony ends with the feeding of a calf.

3. Simantonnayana

According to Ayur-Veda the mind begins to develop in the foetus in the fifth month. This sacrament is usually performed during the period between the 5th and 8th months of pregnancy. The ceremony derives its name (Parting-of-the-hair) from the custom of the women to part their hair in the middle of the head. The parting of the hair symbolises the calming of the mind of the mother-to-be, keeping her psychologically cheerful and free of worries.

While the wife sits facing the east the husband parts her hair using the quill of the porcupine, an ear of ripe paddy and a bunch of Udumbara leaves. This rite is based upon the universal belief that during pregnancy a woman becomes susceptible to attacks by negative forces and evil elementals. The purpose of this sacrament is to protect the mother, ensuring an easy delivery, and to bless the unborn child with health, long life and intelligence.

The deity invoked is Rāka, presiding goddess of the full-moon. The couple pray that the pregnancy will terminate successfully; that the child should be sharp of intellect and penetrating like the quill and should be beautiful like the full-moon.

The gist of the prayer recited is:—

> "I beseech the goddess Rāka (The Full-moon). May she make this rite faultless. May my child be sharp of intellect and generous."

Music, specially on the Veena, is to be played on the occasion as it is believed that the child can already hear. From this time onwards elevating stories of gods and heroes are retold to the child in the womb.

Before delivery a labour-room (*Sūtika-griha*) is selected. The room should be in the south-west corner of the compound. On an auspicious day and time, before the expected date, the soon-to-be mother enters the room after worshipping the elders, family-deities and to the accompaniment of auspicious sounds like ringing of bells or music, attended by experienced and pleasant natured midwives. They prepare the lady for delivery by means of approved diet, ointments, massages etc. When labour starts mantras are chanted outside to ward off evil spirits. All the knots in the house are untied — probably to symbolise loosening of psychological knots and easily delivery of the baby.

When the baby has been delivered a small fire called *Sūtika-agni* used to be lit in a corner of the room. Mustard seeds, herbs and grains are offered into that fire to counteract negative forces and to fumigate the air and protect the newborn and its mother

Post Natal Samskāras

4. Jāta-karma — Samskāra of Birth

This ceremony is supposed to be performed before the umbilical cord is cut, but nowadays it is done along with the naming ceremony on the 11th or 12th day after birth. Once the ten day period of ritual impurity has expired.

The usual preliminaries are done together with the sanctification rite for purifying the house and the occupants. The other main features of this sacrament are;—

1. *Production of Intelligence*. The father takes a coin wrapped in darbha grass and dips it into a mixture of honey, ghee and curds and touches it to the baby's mouth three times while praying that the child will be intelligent and wise.
2. *Longevity*—the child is stroked with the recitation of the Vatsapri hymn and a fire ceremony is done while praying for long-life.
3. *Strength, valour and fame*— the baby is blessed to be as firm & strong as a stone, as sharp as an axe (to overcome enemies) and as incorruptible and as popular as gold

The child is handed over to the mother to suckle with a prayer for protection for both the mother and child.

5. Nāma-karaṇa — Samskāra of Naming

This is a simple ceremony done at the end of the Sacrament of Birth in which the child is given a name. The child is usually named after one of the manifestations of God either in Tamil or Sanskrit. And in the case of a girl she is named after one of the manifestations of the Mother Goddess. By naming children after the Divine we are assured of countless opportunities for the repetition of the name of God!

There are also practices like choosing the name according to the Nakṣatra (Star) of birth. There are 27 birth stars and each one has a few initials associated with it. By giving a name with one of these initials we assure a harmony between the child and the universe.

6. Anna-prāśana — Samskāra of Weaning

The child is weaned at the age of six months. Some sweet rice is usually offered to the family deity or to Annapurna Devi and a morsel is fed to the baby with mantras for ensuring health and longevity and protection.

7. Cauḷa — Samskāra of Tonsure.

This ceremony of the first shaving of the head for longevity and protection is prescribed for boys from the third to the fifth year. Many communities perform this ceremony at one year of age.

An auspicious day for the ceremony has first to be selected and the preliminary ceremonies are performed. The hair is symbolically cut using blades of darbha grass

When this ceremony is done for boys a portion of the head is left unshaved leaving a "top-knot" or *śikha*. The shape of the *śikha* differs from community to community, and between the northern and the southern regions of India. The general rule is that the *śikha* or top-knot should cover an area of the scalp equal to the size of a cow's hoof.

Nowadays among the brahmin communities this ceremony is generally performed along with the Sacrament of Initiation (*Upanayana*). It presupposes that cutting the hair of the child before that year, except in the case of diseases of the head, is forbidden.

The gist of the mantras being;

> "May this child live long — for a hundred years; may the eye-sight remain unimpaired;
> may it become prosperous, "

Thereafter a barber is invited to complete the shave (most modern youth only have a few centimetres shaven from the front of the head as a compromise or just have a close crop).

The cut hair is gathered into a large 'roti' made of dough, wrapped up and disposed of in a river or buried.

8. Karṇa-vedha — Samskāra of Piercing of the Ears.

This is a minor sacrament usually accompanying the Chaula and the Upanayana in the case of boys. It is universal among all Hindus. The purpose of adorning the ears with gold is to introduce and emphasise the first of the wisdom tools — listening. It is through listening that one obtains learning and education. The ears which are the physical gateway through which the Vedas enter into the mind should therefore by decorated accordingly. The other 2 wisdom took are "reflecting" and practical application.

The Educational Samskāras

9. Vidyārambha —- Primary Education

This sacrament is performed to mark the beginning of the education. It is performed when the child first goes to school. The child is bathed, dressed in new clothes and fed. Ganeśa and Sarasvati are invoked and worshipped, after facing east the child is taught to write the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet holding a piece of gold — usually a ring — in a plate of rice.

10. Upanayanam — Spiritual Initiation

Apart from marriage this is the most important sacrament in Vedic culture. It is performed in the 8^{th}, 11^{th} or 12^{th} years of age for all the male members of the first three Varṇas. In ancient India there is also mention of this ceremony being done for girls as well but over the centuries

with the consolidation of gender roles it gradually became obsolete for girls. Nowadays it may be performed for anybody who desires to have it done.

Etymologically the word *Upanayana* means "bringing near" — introducing the boy to the spiritual master and to the most sacred Gāyatrī mantra which is considered to be the greatest of all mantras. The Gāyatrī is the essence of all the Vedas and being initiated into it is called "*Brahmopadeśa*".

Education and learning are what differentiate an *Aryan* (Nobleman) from a *Mleccha* (barbarian). The *Upanayana* was essential for a member of the Hindu community to participate in the performance of sacrifices and for the practice of Dharma. From a secular education one can learn to be another wage earner in a consumer society. From the religious education one learns the rules, regulations and knowledge that make one an Aryan — A Noble Person.

The ceremony itself is very elaborate and contains many parallel rites to a marriage ceremony which is in actual fact the initiation ceremony for a girl — according to Manu

Through the sacrament of initiation, the Guru becomes the adopted father and the Gāyatrī mantra, the mother. The child obtains the right to study the Vedas and to participate in Vedic rituals. He begins his journey on the spiritual path previous to which he was no different to the realm of flora and fauna. It is the learning and application of Dharma which differentiates the human world from the world of flora and fauna — in all other respects — eating, sleeping, procreating and protecting they are the same.

After the usual preliminaries the boy is invested with the sacred thread (*yajñopavitam*) comprised of three strands worn over the left shoulder and resting on the right hip. The three strands symbolise body, speech and mind, and the threefold knot is called *Brahma-granthi* — symbolises the three phases of existence:— creation, preservation and destruction. The student cultivates awareness of the impermanent nature of all existence and strives to attain knowledge the immortal imperishable Brahman — the Absolute Reality. From this day forward the initiate will learn to distinguish between right (*dharma*) and wrong (*adharma*), he will bear full responsibility for all his actions, and the sacred thread will remind him to always be in control of his actions, speech and thought.

While investing the boy with the sacred thread the ācārya blesses him with strength, wisdom and long life. A piece of deer-skin is usually attached to the thread in remembrance of the old days when the students would use a deer skin as an upper garment. It signifies spiritual and intellectual pre-eminence. The *Kaupina* or loincloth is the symbol of chastity, and the girdle (*mekhala*) symbolises that from now on the boy is bound by his obligations as taught in the three Vedas. The staff of palāsa wood given to the boy indicates that he is now a custodian and transmitter of the Sacred Teachings of the Vedas, and gives him long life, lustre and holiness.

Before teaching the Gāyatrī Mantra, the Guru who is often the father, grandfather or an uncle pours water into the joined palms of the boy. The water symbolises life and the official entry of the boy into the spiritual life of his ancestors and lineage.

The boy stands on a grinding stone and is enjoined to develop firmness of resolve and steadfastness in his duties and studies, as well as develop physical strength and excellent health. The initiate then takes certain oaths which are—

(1) to fulfil all vows

(2) to strive for prominence in the world

(3) to engage in creative activities

(4) to perform acts of charity

(5) propitiate the gods

(6) to care for the needs of fellow-beings

(7) to protect subjects or dependents

(8) procreate when married

(9) maintain balanced views and attitudes

(10) to serve elders etc.

The *Brahmacāri* or spiritual aspirant is then taught the daily rituals which he will perform for the rest of his life viz. *Sandhya-vandana* — daily worship of the Sun and chanting of the Gāyatrī mantra, *Samida-dāna*— offerings to the sacred fire, and *Brahma yajña* — daily study of a portion of the Veda.

Through the sacrament of Upanayana the student acquires a second birth and becomes known as a *dvija* (twice-born). The first physical birth is by the natural parents and this, the spiritual birth is through the guru who now takes over the physical as well as the spiritual care of the youth.

The three spiritual truths invoked in this rite are God (*praṇava*), Intelligence (*Medha*) and conviction (*śraddha*)

11. Vivāha — Samskāra of Marriage

According to the Vedic vision, life was ideally divided four stages of development known as *Aśramas*. The first began with the initiation ceremony and was known as the stage of *brahmacharya* — or life dedicated to learning spiritual truths. Thereafter came the householder (*grhasta*), the retiree (*vanaprastha*) and finally the renunciate (*sannyāsa*).

Vi-vaha translated as "marriage" means the assumption of specific burdens. It refers to the supporting and sustaining of dharma which the householder learnt during his years in the first ashram of a brahmacāri. He now as a householder puts into practice all that he learnt.

The householder was the most exalted stage in Vedic society because the householder constitutes the foundation of society. It is the management of resources by the householders which contribute to the welfare of the society as well as the environment, The householder thus fulfils in the mundane world the function of *Maha Vishnu* — the Preserver of the Hindu Trinity. During the nuptial rites the groom is treated as Maha Vishnu Himself and the bride is regarded as Maha Lakshmi. The emphasis in a Hindu marriage is the performance of one's duties. The householder has a duty (*dharma*) to ply himself to legitimately acquiring wealth in order to himself enjoy, to practice dharma and to support students, retirees and renunciates.

The five essential features of a Vedic Marriage are:—

1. *Vāg-dānam* — engagement ceremony – seeking parental approval
2 *Vara-varaṇam* — ceremonial honouring of the groom by the bestower.
3. *Kaṇya dānam* — formal bestowal of the bride on the groom.
4. *Pāṇi-pīḍanam* — taking of the bride's hand by the groom.
5. *Sapta-padi* — the rite of the seven steps.

In South India the tying of the sacred token of marriage (*tāli or maṅgala-sūtra*) is considered of paramount importance although there is no mention of this rite in the Grhya Sūtras.



Samskāras of Death & Beyond

Death

All the ceremonies performed during, and after death are designed to assist the deceased in attaining a realisation of his/her true nature and affording him/her a better rebirth or the attainment of liberation.

Death in fact is not seen as a dreadful necessity but as the greatest opportunity for liberating oneself from *Samsara* (the cycle of rebirth). The concept of reincarnation is the basis of Hinduism. Death is not seen as an end but merely another stage on the seemingly endless road to Self-realisation and unification with the Divine. The body is a mere vehicle to carry the consciousness.

Upon death the individual consciousness is separated from the body and becomes acutely aware and clairvoyant. In other words although disembodied it perceives everything going on around and can in actual fact even read the thoughts of the relatives and friends.

On Dying

When a person ascertains that he/she is about to die the priests are invited and worship is offered to the family deity or to Lord Vishnu through the Salagrama stone. The dying one prays for forgiveness for all the sins committed during the life-time. If he/she is incapable the eldest son performs the rite of absolution on their behalf and charity is given to the poor.

The dying person is also transferred from the bed to the floor. There are two reasons for this:—

1. First of all it facilitates in the process of chanting and the rites which are being performed since the Brahmins themselves are seated on the floor and also to help the dying person to die with as much awareness as possible.

2. Secondly the bed would have to be discarded if someone was allowed to die in it.

If possible everyone should be permitted to die at home surrounded by relatives and friends all sending out thoughts of love and affection. All weeping is discouraged because this affects the consciousness of the dying person and causes feelings of attachment and guilt to arise.

The sacred water and tulsi leaf are then administered to the dying person and the priests and family members begin the chanting of the hymn of the thousand names of lord Vishnu (*Vishnu Sahasranama Stotram*). The idea is that the thought which occupies the mind at the time of death conditions the future rebirth. If one dies concentrating on the Supreme Lord then liberation will be obtained.

During these days of mourning it is customary to arrange for the daily reading of the Garuda Purana which deals with the subject of death and rebirth and experiences in the after-life.

Funeral — Antyeṣṭi

At the moment of death a lamp is light at the head of the deceased and will be kept burning until the 12th day of purification. The lamp is kept burning and daily offerings of rice balls and water libations are made. The idea being that the deceased often does not realise that death has occurred, and being in the habit of eating and drinking do not realise that they no longer require physical nourishment and are therefore afflicted by hunger and thirst.

The corpse is bathed by the family and dressed in a new unwashed cloth — white for males and red for married females. A garland is placed around the neck. In the meantime the chanting continues and the women are restrained from weeping in the presence of the corpse. The corpse is placed on a bier or in a plain wooden coffin with no ornamentation and accompanied by the

chanting of the Lord's name it is taken to the cemetery for cremation. Although there is also provision made in the Shastra for burial, cremation is the preferred method of disposal of the corpse.

The cremation ceremony is quite brief and all the rites are done by the eldest son. After offering libations of water for the deceased all the mourners proceed to the banks of a river or seashore were they bath and sit giving vent to their grief until the evening and then they return home.

The Posthumous Rites

According to the Scriptures our assistance to the deceased does not stop with the cremation of the body. We can still help with their spiritual evolution by performing rituals, and making offerings are their behalf.

The ashes are usually collected on the 2nd or the 3rd day and are disposed of by being consigned to a river or the sea, or buried in a clay vase.

On the 11th, 12th and 13th day certain ceremonies are performed for the welfare of the family of the deceased. There is the purification and peace ceremony marking the end of the period of mourning and the return to the daily routine. There is also the final ceremony of farewell in which the deceased is officially united with the ancestors and consigned to a place in the family lineage.

Days of Mourning

Death is also a period of major emotional trauma — and time being the great healer — the Rishis have once again prescribed a period of ten to 30 days for mourning and grieving. The length of the grieving process varies from community to community, but what is most important is that it must be given a channel, it must be allowed and encouraged. Recognizing this inherent psychological need, our incredible sages have given us the most comprehensive grieving rituals! These rituals of death are designed not only to benefit the deceased through our bonds of love and our prayers but also to work through our own grief.

According to the Scriptures the period of mourning last for 10 days in the case of Brahmins and 40 days in the case of non-Brahmins. The reason being that the Brahmins are supposed to be more spiritually aware of the process of death and rebirth, and being less attached require a shorter period to overcome their loss. If one cannot take 10 days of from work one should at least take three days off and observe the customs of mourning which are;—

1. Sleeping on the ground,
2. Abstinence from sex or any kind of recreation,
3. Not preparing any meals, and having only vegetarian food,
4. abstaining from visiting or entertaining guests.
5. Refraining from shaving or cutting hair and nails.

During the period of mourning once again all the family members are exempt from their social and religious duties. There is no need for them to offer the obligatory hospitality and all visitors are banned from requesting or even expecting any kind of service. The mourners are excused from even greeting those who come to pay their respects! The protocol has all been layed down thousands of years ago. The friends and acquaintances come sit for a while, comfort the mourners and then depart, there is no need to engage them in idle conversation and banter. The visitors come to encourage the family in their mourning process. The family are exempt from all religious duties other than those prescribed for the posthumous rites and all these are designed to saturate the family members in their thoughts of the deceased to give them space to resolve all their unexpressed conflicts and feelings.

Appendix

Unnatural Death

In the case of violent or an unnatural death such as drowning, accident, murder, suicide, or a death from a disease involving much suffering such as cancer or AIDS a special rite known as Narayana Bali is performed in lieu of the usual ceremonies.

In all these cases the victim becomes locked into the suffering and trauma of the death experience and is incapable of escaping and attaining rebirth or liberation. In the astral plane they are again and again experiencing the trauma and suffering of their death and become tormented earth-bound souls. In order to release such a person the Rite of Narayana Bali is prescribed. Prayers are offered for their release and donations are made to charity on their behalf.

Ritual Impurity

Ritual impurity is a much misunderstood subject. Ritual impurity (*asaucham*) does not correlate to the germ theory of disease and hygiene, it relates solely to the psychological predisposition for the performance of one's religious duties (*dharma*).

The technical term *asaucham* is derived from *suchi* which means a sentiment of love, purity, clarity. The prefix "a" indicates the opposite state. It refers to a state of ritual unsuitability or ineligibility rather than suggesting a state uncleanliness, dirt or pollution which the English word "impure" conjures up.

There are three main occasions which bring about a state of ritual ineligibility;–

1. death,
2. birth
3. menstruation.

Birth — Post partum

The birthing process as all parents know is a major catalytic event in the life of any woman. It is both physically traumatic and emotionally chaotic. The advent of baby turns whole families upside down and necessitates a complete change of life style and learning of new skills and developing of new coping mechanisms.

The ancient Rishis were well aware of the nature of childbirth and in order to facilitate a therapeutic environment instituted the concept of *asaucham*.

The period of *asaucham* prescribed after birth was for ten days and applied to the mother. During these ten days the mother was exempt from all domestic and ritual chores. The reason for this today is obvious for medical reasons. The new-born child receives its antibodies and ability to fight off infection through the mother's milk. Therefore until its immunity is strengthened it should be protected from the possibility of catching infections from hordes of visitors. The mother should be allowed to rest and to bond with her new-born child rather than expending unnecessary energy chatting to visitors. And it is also encouraging to be served hand and foot and to have everything done for one!

So even in modern society it is possible to maintain this tradition and avoid visiting new mothers before the ten day period is over (unless off course it is to help her with domestic chores which she could not abandon due to the break down of the extended family system!)

Menstruation

With the advent of women's liberation and female awareness the concept of menstruation being an "impurity" is anathema![3] But nevertheless we have all experienced the spin off emotions from the dreaded PMT! Everyone realises that menstruation is a time when female hormones are in a state of anarchy which results in all kinds of emotional stuff. Some women cope better than others, but there are still very subtle changes going on in the female body.

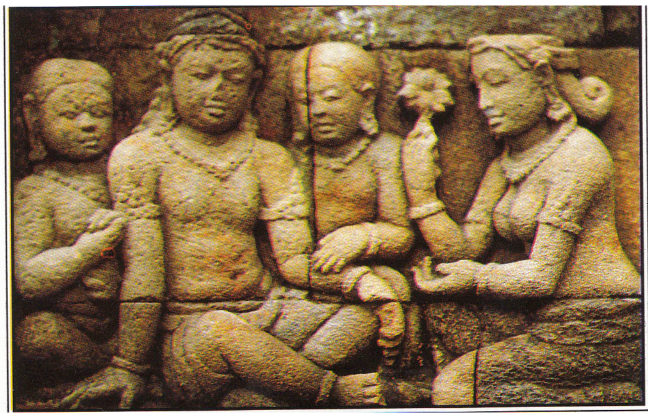
The ancients may not have been experts on the biological process but they were completely aware of the psychological ramifications — so once again they prescribed a period of ritual exemption! For the three to four days of the period a woman was exempt from all household chores, as well as the tedious social and ritual obligations! She could have a holiday, and everything would be done for her, all cooking, washing, ironing, cleaning etc.! In ancient India it should be remarked there were no weekends, and most men only had days off on the festivals. So here was a bit of legislation which in actual fact benefited women more than men!

The ancients made some restriction which no longer apply for example a woman was advised not to bathe during this time. The reason being that in rural India even today, bathing means going to the communal tank, stream or river to bathe and the possibility of shedding blood into a communal water source was considered abhorrent.

It must be remarked that the presence of all exudates from the human body are considered as grounds for ritual disqualification. For example even the presence of a weeping wound in a male disqualifies him from performing rituals or attending temples. The only difference being that in women it is a regular occurrence whereas with men it is a rare incident.

The First Menstruation

There is a ceremony called *prathama artava* which could also be classified as a Sacrament. It is performed after the first menstruation. The day on which it appears is noted and a learned priest is informed. The horoscope for the moment is caste and consulted and in accordance with certain Astrological indications the ceremony is performed for the sanctification of the girl and for her protection and well-being and hope for future fertility and reproduction.



[3] Perhaps a better phrase to use would be 'social exemption'.